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SWINBURNE'S POETIC THEORIES AND PRACTICE

The essential principles of poetry, as laid down by Mr. Swinburne, are briefly: ". . . imagination and harmony the primary elements of poetry"; ". . . "it requires a perceptible but indefinable charm"; ". . . "poetry must do nothing that can be formulated, it must simply elude." In illustration of these chief ideas the following excerpt from "Atalanta in Calydon" possesses something of an "indefinable charm," and perhaps affords the best example, for present purposes at least, of the poet's definition:

Bind on thy sandals, O thou most fleet,
Over the splendor and speed of thy feet;
For the faint east quickens, the wan west shivers,
Round the feet of the day and the feet of the night.

In Mr. Swinburne's essay, entitled "Whitmania," we are told, that "in poetry, perhaps above all the other arts, the method or treatment, the manner of touch, the tone of expression, is the first and last thing to be considered." This manner is certainly characteristic of Mr. Swinburne's method. He makes the element of rhythm the basis of his poetic art. As a result the element of thought becomes a secondary consideration. But it is true that the spirit of mysticism, in consequence of this seemingly illusive thought-element, makes for certain not well-defined poetic charms. The musical quality produces upon this condition an even more augmented effect.

The choice of theme, too, has much to do with the spirit of mysticism in Swinburne's poetry. Our poet finds much inspiration in those things of the Middle Ages, and even in classical lore, that lend themselves to poetic treatment. He seeks inspiration in the romantic myths and legends of the past. And not only is Mr. Swinburne's classicism noticeable in his choice of themes, but it appears even to a more marked degree in his adaptation of classical metres. His method, however, is purely one of imitation; and these imitations are "frankly accentual with no effort to introduce fixed quantities into English."¹ Mr.

¹ R. M. Alden: "English Verse: Specimens illustrating its principles and history," N. Y., 1903.

Swinburne, himself, says : "It is hard to realize and hopeless to reproduce the musical force of classic metres so recondite and exquisite as the choral parts of a Greek play. Even Milton could not ; though with his godlike instinct and his godlike might of hand he made a kind of strange and enormous harmony by intermixture of assonance and rhyme with irregular blank verse." ²

Upon his own translation of "The Birds" from Aristophanes, in seven stress anapestic, he adds a note that well indicates his conscious classic effort : "It was undertaken from a consideration of the fact that the marvelous metrical invention of the anapestic heptameter was almost exactly reproducible in a language to which all variations and combinations of anapestic, iambic, or trochaic metre are as natural and pliable as all dactylic and spondaic forms of verse are unnatural and abhorrent." ³

Under the influence of this classic spirit, Mr. Swinburne has practiced and introduced many foreign metres. Especially does he indulge in the practice of artificial French lyrical forms. He has reintroduced, according to Mr. Alden, the old word-form "roundel," for example, in order to distinguish this style of rondeau, of his own devising, containing nine long lines, and rhyming *a b a, b a b, a b a*, the refrain rhyming also with the *b* lines.

Mr. Swinburne, in criticising the verse of any poet, demands first of all—metre. Here and there one runs across a terse opinion upon this or that poet's anapests or his hexameters. He criticises very severely Ben Jonson's anapests : he does not care one whit for hexameters. In "Whitmania," Walt Whitman is rebuked for want of metre. Mr. Swinburne says, ". . . but metre, rhythm, cadence, not merely appreciable but definable and reducible to rule and measurement . . . we demand from all who claim, we discern in the works of all who have achieved, any place among poets of any class whatsoever." Mr. Swinburne furthermore tells us that Whitman had no palinode to chant, no recantation to intone. From all this evidence it is conclusive that Mr. Swinburne's tenets of poetic composition are

² "Essays and Studies," pp. 162-63.

³ Alden, p. 45.

chiefly concerned with the structure of and expression in the verse.

An examination of the verse of Mr. Swinburne's poems reveals a poetic strength which is sustained in the many varieties. One could spend much time, and spend it indeed with profit, upon the mere stanzaic form of the shorter poems. These stanzas are quite varied in their structures. The rhyme scheme and the metre are in many instances rather intricate. It may be a question, in some cases, whether they are symbolic of the thought and feelings embodied in the poem. In this selection from the "chorus" in "Atalanta in Calydon," the last verse is suggestive, at least, of the use of the last verse in the Spenserian stanza :

In the ears of the world
It is sung, it is told,
And the light thereof hurled
And the noise thereof rolled
From the Acroceranlian snow to the ford of the fleece of gold.

The opposite effect impresses itself upon the reader in the following selection, entitled "A Leave-Taking," in which the final verse is but half the length of the foregoing verses in the stanza :

Let us go hence, my songs ; she will not hear ;
Let us go hence together without fear.
Keep silence now, for singing-time is over,
And over all old things and all things dear,
She loves not you nor me as all we love her :
Yea, though we sang as angels in her ear,
She would not hear.

The effect produced by the abrupt changes in the length of lines in these stanzas is best felt by reading the poems aloud. Much depends upon the reader's mood and disposition also to appreciate the sentiment that inspired Mr. Swinburne when composing these verses. On the other hand it is well to bear in mind that many of the longer lines in Mr. Swinburne's stanzas are clearly inorganic, so that it would therefore hardly be wise to make too much of this matter of the poet's consciousness in having the stanzaic form convey the idea.

One is inclined to suspect that Mr. Swinburne's stanzaic structures are largely the result of exercises, pure and simple.

Some poets do indulge in artificial and involved phrases and expressions. This is certainly the case with Mr. Swinburne. His disposition seems to warrant this fact. Notice the many varieties of structure in any collection of his poems. Here are a few examples taken at random :

"August"	<i>a a b b b a</i>	—4 stress throughout.
"The Sundew"	<i>a b b a b</i>	—4 stress throughout.
"The Garden of Proserpine"	<i>a b a b c c c b</i>	—3 stress throughout.
"A Song in Time of Order"	<i>a b a b</i>	—3 stress throughout.
"A Song in Time of Revolution"	<i>a a</i>	—6 stress (not organic).
"In a Garden"	<i>a₃ b₂ b₃ a₅</i>	
"A Ryme"	<i>aba₃ b₂</i>	
"To Victor Hugo"	<i>aa₃ b₅ cc₃ b₅ c₄ c₅</i>	
"A Christmas Carol"	<i>a₄ b₃ a₄ bcc₃</i>	
"Madonna Mia"	<i>aaa₃ b₂ ccc₃ b₂</i>	
"Love at Sea"	<i>a₃ b₂ a₃ b₂ aaa₃ b₂</i>	

In an examination of the poems of Mr. Swinburne it will be found that comparatively few of the long lines are organic. There seems to be no apparent reason for expressing the following two thoughts in one long line :

Calls loud on his brother for witness ; his hands that were laden with blossom are sprinkled with snow."— *From "March."*

or similarly in this long line :

It was well with our fathers ; their sound was in all men's lands.— *From "Mater Dolorosa."*

Indeed, there are examples among Mr. Swinburne's poems, of the organic long line, but they are not many. Here is an instance :

She is gray with the dust of time on his manifold ways,
Where her faint feet stumble and falter through yearlong days.

But notice the repetition of the sense in the second verse—"stumble and falter." It is evidently not an easy task to write a purely organic long verse in poetry.

The favorite metre with Mr. Swinburne is the iambic. Of thirty-three poems examined, twenty-one were found to be in iambic meter, eight in anapestic, three in trochaic, and but one in dactylic. The iambic and anapestic are interwoven quite frequently. The longer lines are mostly anapestic.

In the matter of stresses, of twenty-nine poems examined,

twelve (including the dramas) were of five-stress verse ; six of four-stress ; six of three-stress ; two of two-stress ; two of seven-stress ; and one of eight-stress.

The rhythmical accent is the prevailing one in the poems. This results from Mr. Swinburne's habit, perhaps unconscious as it seems to be, to be overcome by the music of his verse. The sense of many lines suffers as a consequence, since the thought is overshadowed. Regular rhythm is so characteristic of the dramas, for example, that the musical quality of the verse would be marred were the rhetorical and word accent forced in. Probably the best way to enjoy the full sense and appreciation of the dramas, would be to read them first for the meaning, and then again for the musical effect.

There is one peculiarity of the verse structure of the dramas which is noteworthy. There appears to be a superabundance of monosyllabic words, comparatively few disyllabic, and very few polysyllabic. This phenomenon seems to indicate a conscious effort on the part of Mr. Swinburne in selecting monosyllabic words, as far as possible, for musical effect. The result is pleasing. The flow of the rhythm and the sharpness of accent is much more definite and attractive, than if no choice were made in selecting words. In twenty-two lines of "Bothwell" only ten words of more than one syllable were found, and not one of these contained more than two syllables ; and not more than one was found in the lines containing them. In twenty-eight lines of "Atalanta in Calydon" thirteen lines were found containing each one disyllabic word ; five containing two dissyllabic words ; two containing three dissyllabic words ; four containing each one tri-syllabic word ; and one containing a word of four syllables. An interesting paper could be written upon Mr. Swinburne's choice of words, as to their classic or Anglo-Saxon origin.

It is somewhat strange that a poet of such precise methods in verse structure should indulge in the freedom of run-on lines. Perhaps this freedom is one of the essentials of Mr. Swinburne's art. Nevertheless he does indulge in it quite often. A comparative list of percentages might give one a fair idea of the extent to which the poet indulges in this practice :

Seven in twenty-eight lines,	25%
Seven in twenty-eight lines,	25%
Five in twenty-eight lines,	18%
Nine in thirty lines,	30%
Eight in sixty lines,	13%
Average,	22%

These figures are taken from lines in the dramas, and the percentages are merely approximate.

It is well-known what a master Mr. Swinburne is of the art of "onomatopœia." Numerous examples of this are to be found in the poems. Notice the tone-color in these verses from "Winter in Northumberland":

Till, as with clamor
Of axe and hammer,
Chained streams that stammer and struggle in straits,
Burst bonds that shiver,
And thaws deliver
The roaring river in stormy spates.

The use of alliteration is at once apparent in these lines.

Mr. Swinburne appears to be very fond of feminine rhymes. It is noticeable that many of the rhyming words end either in the syllable "er" or "ing." See, for example, the poem entitled "The Garden of Proserpine":

I watch the green field *growing*
For reaping folk and *sowing*,
For harvest time and *mowing* . . .

In this particular poem the feminine endings in the successive stanzas are upon such syllables, *ers*, *es*, *ed*, *low*, *en* and *ful*.

In the poem entitled "Before Dawn" the same characteristic is noticeable ; but in this poem there are six feminine rhymes in each stanza, as for example :

Ah! one thing worth beginning,
One thread in life worth spinning,
Ah, sweet, one sin worth sinning
With all the whole soul's will;
To lull you till one stilled you,
To kiss you till one killed you,
To feed you till one filled you,
Sweet lips, if love could fill.

The use of masculine ending here is quite forcible and reveals the measured time of music in verse.

The appreciation of Mr. Swinburne's poetry is far and wide, but he is chiefly noted as a metrist. The variety of his metres and stanzas indicates a thorough mastery of his art. The tone-quality of his verse affords ample fields for delightful study. Alliteration and assonance make his poems attractive. The strength and force of his vocabulary signify a conscious effort in the choice of proper poetic diction, agreeing of course with his theories upon the subject of poetic diction. In the adaptation of metrical form to sentiment, also, one appreciates many of the shorter poems. For all these things one can honestly admire our poet. They are his strong points, and he excels in them.

Upon consideration, however, it will be found that Mr. Swinburne does not fulfill all the conditions necessary to become a poet of the highest rank. There are very few expressions and truths uttered by the poet that have become famous. One does not remember his poems by the thought expressed in them, simply because it is too often overshadowed by the rhythmical element. Furthermore, there is a decided lack of concentration in the poems of Mr. Swinburne. Many lines are repeated in part and amplified, for, apparently, no other reason than for the sake of metre. As a consequence you will find long lines in some of the poems, but they are inorganic in most cases. And certainly it is no art to write an inorganic long line of verse.

As the sunshine quenches the snowshine; as April subdues thee, and yields
up his kingdom to May; . . . —*From "March."*

Here is an example of an eight-stress line, with a repetition of the sense in the second half. There is here a "tumultuous swell of words not in proportion to the amount of meaning to be evolved out of it." Poetry demands thought as well as rhythm; but Mr. Swinburne seems to be almost entirely outside of the realms of thought. His alliteration and assonance, for example, are over-worked; and sometimes they are secured only at some expense of clearness.

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